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ABSTRACT

The authors describe difficulties encountered by learning disabled (LD) students and summarize ways LD young adults have learned to cope with daily problems. The importance of understanding their problems, seeking out sensitive professionals, developing strategies to cope with classroom demands, and obtaining counseling are stressed. Strategies found successful in dealing with stress and tension, educational problems, social situations, and employment interviews are reviewed. A checklist is provided to help LD students analyze their skills and relate them to the demands of the job. (CL)

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THE WORLD IS A LEARNING PLACE

Helping Learning Disabled Adults Develop Survival Skills.

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The World Is A Learning Place

How does it feel to be an adult with a learning disability? What are the unique problems that present themselves during all stages of professional training and how does one develop the survival skills to cope with the difficult demands of our complex world.

"I spent many extra years getting the training to become a doctor", said the articulate, 45 year old Psychiatrist who we interviewed. It took me five years to complete college, three years to get a M.S. in Microbiology and I was well on my way to getting a PhD when I was finally admitted to a foreign medical school. I even had to master a second language to handle the classes. I was 35 years old before I earned my first dollar as an interne. Now I spend many a restless night having a recurring nightmare that they will come and take my M.D. degree away from me and find out I'm a fraud."

The nightmare that they describe is the same, whether they are plumbers, carpenters, artists, actors or medical professionals. They are always acutely aware of the their tenuous situation.

Many report enduring a countless number of humiliating experiences. College graduates were told that they did not have the ability to attend college.

"You are wasting our time and your father's money", was the comment reported by one young man of 35. "If I had believed my english instructor when he said that I would probably be pumping gas or waiting tables. Instead I received my Master's Degree and now I'm a vocational counsellor helping the unemployed."

An insensitive teacher can make your life hell they told us. "Why are you the one who asks all the stupid questions?", is the typical kind of embarrassing comment.

Yet there are peak experiences that make it all worthwhile, the hard won degree, the good job, the marriage, the birth of a child, the unexpected achievement that came after hard work.

Given appropriate support, these young people continue to strive to make it in an alien world. They set goals, work to achieve them and continue to fight the system in spite of its negative massages.

Although their perception of what constituted appropriate support varied, there where some oft repeated

"In my family we were expected to do our best, no matter what grades we got," said 33 year old Bess, "so I just kept on plugging."

"I was expected to go to college, and there was just no question about it", said 29 year old Hal. "My parents said that they had to bypass obstacles and this was the one I had to handle. My mother and father supported me whether I was right or wrong."

The need for a mentor to help one get through the system was noted often. If parents were not acting as mentor, often a teacher or specialist assumed the role.

Chris, a 34 year old truck driver told us "My seventh grade teacher told me that she was going to get me to read that year (I was reading at third grade level) and she did. She took me for tutoring every day after school. She never missed a day and neither did I. She even convinced my father to stop strapping me cause I couldn't read. By the end of seventh grade I even believed that I'd finish school and not quit."

Feelings of social inadequacy had to be overcome and it often took these young people longer to learn to deal with others in the workplace.

"You are afraid to ask too many questions for fear of sounding stupid", confided Joe, a 35 year old printer. "I could never tell my boss I had dyslexia, he thinks that the office should only be run by a straight A student."

Mark, a 40 year old builder who has become a successful land developer said that he was "The first in his family in four generations not to go to Harvard." It had taken him all these years to get over the social stigma of that fact. When he quit college at the end of the first year, his family thought that he wouldn't amount to much.

The comments made by these young people are punctuated with words like anxiety, inadequacy, embarrassment, humiliation, and even mention of clinical depression. But there were also words like hope, love, faith, kindness and caring.

"When you have to survive, you find ways to do it" said 27 year old Susan, now a professional photographer. "The strategies you use may be unique but if they work for you, use them," she said.

Some of the strategies that they found helpful for them were as follows:

a. Getting to understand their problems so that they could act as missionaries for themselves with others. This helped them be more realistic about their strengths and weaknesses so that they could get appropriate traihing and set life goals.
b. Trying to find sensitive professionals who could direct them into appropriate schools, training and vocations.
c. Getting help in dealing with social problems.
d. Developing strategies to cope with classroom demands.
e. Asking for some modifications in demands when necessary such as shorter reading or writing assignments or oral rather than written assignments.
f. Designing vocational strategies to help them succeed on the job despite their weaknesses.
g. Getting counseling to help their spouses to understand their problems so that their different perceptions don't interfere with a successful marital relationship.

Some of the strategies that worked well for our clients are the following:

<u>To Deal with stress and tension:</u>

If You are a person with a short fuse, easily angered or frustrated by things that you cannot control, try to devise a personal system for handling your stress. It may be as simple as counting to 10 before reacting, or concentrating on deep breathing, stretching, or taking time out to get away from a stressful situation. It might also be combined with a program of exercise, yoga, competitive sports or walking and jogging. When things get out of control try to turn off of emotions that make you overreact.

<u>To Deal with Educational problems:</u>

At school, try to get someone who is good at spelling, grammar, and punctuation to proofread your papers before you hand them in.

Try to determine what your strengths are and try to take courses in those areas where you are most likely to succeed. If you are ready to go on to college, look for one with a support program for the learning disabled or one that offeres alternative ways of performing.

Be ready to work harder and longer to do the same thing that others do.

If you have directional problems try to develop a personal color coding system (red-right, green-left) to organize yourself in things which require left-right discrimination.

If you are going on to school, look for a smaller school with an appropriate program. The larger the school the less personal attehtion seems to be forthcoming for young adults wit special needs.

In social situations:

Try to observe the behavior of people you admire and emulate that behavior. Train yourself to be a listener and observer, not always one who talks and acts first.

Remember when you are an adult, you can play the "video" of your earlier life back and better understand your problems, so seekcounselling help if you can.

Don't judge others unkindly just because they did that to you.

When trying to get a job:

Carry Clue cards with you when you go to write out applications and to interviews. Write the kind of words on applications and their answers with words correctly spelled. Write sample questions that you might have to answer during an interview.

Rank the kind of jobs you feel qualified to do in a sequence from 1-10, starting with the easiest job at #1. Start applying for

the eastest jobs, keeping track of the questions asked at interviews. By the time you get to job # 5 you will probably be better able to know what to expect at an interview and how to field the questions.

When you finally get that job, find someone in the office who seems more understanding and sympathetic. Go to that person and ask for help when you need it.

Remember "no one has yet clearly defined the best educational setting that translates into the best adaptation to vocational demands.".

Most employers, when questioned about the things they prefered in their employees ranked the following qualifications:

(1) That an employee be neat presentable and make a good appearance at word.

(2) That an employee be reliable, arrive on time and complete assigned tasks.

(3) That an employee be able to get along with the rest of the office staff.

None of the employers questioned in this study mentioned the need to have high grades in reading, spelling and mathematics as a prerequisite to employment.

Do a bit of personal job analysis before seeking that job. The enclosed Checklist of Vocational Tips for Young Adults will give you some suggestions for analysing your skills and relate them to the demands of the jobs you seek.

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Checklist Of Vocational Tips for young Adults

1.___ Do I know my strengths and weakness?(list them)

Strengths	Weaknesses
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

2.__ Will the Job I would like to get require strengths in these areas and do I have the needed strengths?

Job skill demanded	Do I have this skill?
a. verbal communication	a._____
b. Telephone message taking	b._____
c. elementary level reading	c._____
d. Middle School reading level(grades 6-9)	d._____
e. Secondary level reading (grade 9-12)	e._____
f. Post-secondary reading (grade 12+)	f._____
g. Elementary math skills	g._____
h. Middle-high school math	h._____
i. Post high school math	i._____
j. legible handwriting	j._____
k. Adequate spelling	k._____
l. ability to handle stress	l. _____
m. ability to meet deadlines	m._____
n. getting to work on time	n._____
o. other skills	O._____
_____	_____
_____	_____

3.__ Will the job I want require the ability to relate to a lot of people? Social skills required:

Social Skill Demanded	Do I have these social skills
a. Ability to relate to one person at a time.	a._____
b. Ability to relate well in small groups (2-5)	b._____
c. Ability to work will in a large group(5 +)	c._____
d. Ability to relate to the opposite sex.	d._____

4.__Will the job I am seeking require a special kind of clothing? Can I dress properly for the job?

a. Kind of clothing required a._____

b. Do I have that kind of clothes or can I buy them? b._____

Checklist of Vocational Tips for Young Adults

5.__ Will the job I want require me to travel a great deal?

Skills required	Skills I have
a. Take public transportation.	a._____
b. Drive a car	b._____
c. Drive a company owned vehicle or truck.	c._____
d. Follow road maps.	d._____
e. follow complicated instructions.	e._____

6.__ Will the job I want require me to take a lot of phone messages?

skills required	skills I have
a. good listening memory	a._____
b. repeated instructions to remember & write down	b._____
c. clear legible handwriting	c._____
d. write while listeining on the telephone	d._____

7.__ Does the job I want require the writing of invoices, sales orders, reports?

skills required:	skills I have
a. adequate writing skills.	a._____
b. Good addition skills	b._____
" multiplication skills	_____
Calculator skills	_____
basic computer skills	_____
word processing skills	_____
taping skills with cassette recorder	_____

Suggestions:

1. Be honest with yourself when filling out this checklist. The only one you fool is yourself if you overestimate your abilities.

2. Set your sights on realistic goals. You can prove your value in an entry job through hard work and reliability.

3. Try to decide if the job you want has certain repeated tasks. If it does and you can make out checklists of steps to be performed you can make the job easier. Remeber the pilot never takes off in his plane without first checking his checklist.

4. Always ask for advice from those people in your office. They have experience and will share it with you. One question can save a lot of trial and error.

5. Remember the number of adults with learning disabilities who have made it. They had the same self doubts when they started.

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